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ABSTRACT

Making a promise involves a self-conscious, self-commitment to undertake an obligation in the future and involves a personal sense of control. To study promises and self-focused attention, 72 women completed measures of self-focused attention and locus of control, a questionnaire, and were asked to promise to return postcards. As predicted, women's self-reports of attention focused on the self were positively and significantly correlated with the subjectivity of their reported moral judgments of promise-making and promise-breaking. In addition, women high in self-consciousness were low in reported self-confidence in their abilities to keep a promise. The predicted relationship of self-consciousness and estimates of others' promise-keeping was also negative. The findings suggest that self-focused attention or self-awareness is related to the domain of promises, an important and morally central human concern. (Author/JAC)

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PROMISES AND SELF-FOCUSED ATTENTION

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The purpose of this research was to explore empirically the domain of promises. A promise as defined in Webster's Dictionary is "one's pledge to another to do or not do something specified." Promises are made in everyday life, in important and significant moments in life, and in the realm of politics, religion, and the law. Philosophers, theologians, legal scholars and artists have discussed and analyzed the nature of promises, seeing a promise as a paradigm of moral obligation.

Making a promise involves a self-conscious, self-commitment to undertake an obligation in the future; therefore I reasoned that a study should focus on a person's self-consciousness and personal sense of control. An appropriate theoretical framework is found in Self-Awareness Theory, originally proposed by Duval and Wicklund (1972) and developed later by Wicklund (1975) and Wicklund and Frey (1980). Self-awareness, also termed self-focused attention and private self-consciousness, is a state in which a person's attention is inwardly focused upon the self. Self-focused attention is a condition producing psychological effects such as self-criticism, self-doubt, self-attribution of responsibility, individuation, lessening of personal control, conformity and consistency with norms, social facilitation, and heightened sensitivity to one's emotions. Self-awareness or self-consciousness can be conceptualized as an organismic variable or chronic disposition of the individual

capable of being tapped by a private self-consciousness scale developed by Fenigstein, Scheier, and Buss (1975).

The major research question in this study was whether in the domain of promises persons' self-reports, attributions, judgments, assessments and promise behavior vary with their degree of self-focused attention. A secondary focus of the research was to explore the relationship of an internal sense of control as conceptualized by Rotter (1971) and Reid and Ware (1973,1974) to the domain of promises. Thus independent variables in this study were self-focused attention and internal locus of control. The dependent variables concerning promises and promising, consisted of five self-report variables and two behavioral variables. The behavioral variables were the time taken to make a promise (a latency measure), and a measure of promise keeping, i.e. whether a promise to send back four postcards over three weeks time was kept. The self-report variables consisted of assessments by questionnaire of the following: self-responsibility for breaking promises, self-confidence for promise keeping, estimates of others' promise keeping, subjectivity of moral judgments about promising and assessed possibility of promises, or ideas about what promises are possible.

For the self-report variables the hypotheses drawn from self-awareness theory were that self-focused attention would vary positively with self-responsibility, vary positively with

subjectivity of moral judgments about promises, but vary negatively with self-confidence for promise keeping, estimates of others' promise keeping, and assessed possibility of promises. The hypotheses for the behavioral variables were that self-consciousness would vary positively with the number of post-cards returned and with the time taken to make a promise. Secondary hypotheses were predicted for internal locus of control. Since theoretically a sense of internal control and self-focused attention are negatively related, the hypotheses for the relationship of the independent to dependent variables were reversed. Rotter's work on locus of control and inter-personal trust (1971) also supported the predictions.

Method

Subjects were 72 women-- 24 in their twenties, 24 in their thirties, and 24 in their forties. They were recruited in and around a private academic institution in Fairfield County, Connecticut. Subjects were guaranteed confidentiality and no names were used in any of the procedures. Each subject was given an individual appointment and was met by a research assistant (blind to the hypotheses being tested) who gave the subjects two sets of questionnaires in two settings. At the completion of the promise questionnaire, the subject was asked by the experimenter to promise to return four postcards over the next three weeks. The time required for the woman to refuse or to make a promise was measured by a handheld timer. The postcards

contained ratings of memory for the experimental procedures and served as a behavioral measure of promise keeping as they were mailed in and counted.

The independent variables of self-focused attention and locus of control were operationalized by using measures previously tested for reliability and validity. Self-consciousness or self-focused attention was measured by the private self-consciousness scale developed by Fenigstein, Scheier and Buss (1975) and used extensively since. The locus of control measure used was developed by Reid and Ware (1973,1974) which recognizes multi-dimensionality and includes a self-control dimension.

The dependent self-report variables of the study were contained within a promise questionnaire specially constructed and developed for this reasearch. (See Appendix) The promise questionnaire had been given on two previous occasions and the responses statistically analyzed for homogeneity. Items which are used within a subscale to make up a self-report variable such as "subjectivity of moral judgment" are correlated with the total subscale score. Thus, for example, subjectivity of moral judgment about promising was operationalized as the choosing of answers which give priority to the individual's personal plans, intentions and changes in circumstance, rather than to moral duty, absolute moral obligations and immutable rules which apply regardless of changes in individual intentions or personal plans. In these questions the intent was to tap a person's weighting of the claims of the individual self versus the claims of impersonal objective rules.

The self-report variables of self-responsibility for promise breaking, self-confidence for promise keeping and estimates of others' promise keeping were operationalized by asking for straightforward assessments in answer to direct questions. The self-report variable of assessed possibility of promises was operationalized by asking for a subject's agreement or disagreement to the question of whether a promise can be made to a "piece of land," "a tree or plant," "a pet," "a person," "a group," "one's self," "God," "the dead," or "future generations." Subjects were also asked whether there could be a mutual promise between "a person and a pet," " a person and a group," and so on.

Results

The hypotheses were tested by calculating product moment correlations with one-tailed tests of significance between private self-consciousness scale scores, the locus of control scale scores, and the seven dependent variables. One-tailed tests were used because in each case the hypotheses predicted correlation results in a specific direction. As predicted, women's self-reports of attention focused on the self were positively and significantly correlated with the subjectivity of their reported moral judgments of promise making and promise breaking ($p < .05$, one-tailed). In addition, women high in self-consciousness were low in reported self-confidence in their abilities to keep a promise ($p < .05$, one-tailed). The predicted relationship of self-consciousness and estimates of others' promise keeping was also negative as expected, but did not attain statistical significance ($p < .06$, one-tailed).

With the study's dependent behavioral variables the correlation between self-consciousness and time taken to make a promise measured in seconds was r =.19 ($p<.10$, one-tailed). When age is partialled out, this correlation is increased (r = .25, $p<.05$, one-tailed). As for private self-consciousness scores and the number of postcards returned, the correlation was r=.17 ($p<.10$, one-tailed) and when age is partialled out, the correlation increased to .21 ($p<.05$, one-tailed).

Moreover, as predicted, internality of locus of control was positively and significantly correlated with more positive estimates of others' promise keeping (r =.49, $p<.001$, one-tailed). Internal locus of control was also negatively correlated with self-consciousness, giving support to self-awareness theory's assertion that self-focused attention produces lessened personal control.

Other descriptive findings were of interest for the exploration of the domain of promises. For instance, although a philosopher such as Austin (1962) claims that persons cannot make valid promises without receiving human "social uptake," half of the subjects agreed that they could make promises to a pet or to future generations. 42% thought there could be a mutual promise between a person and a pet.

Conclusions and Discussion

One obvious conclusion concerning this initial exploratory

research is the need for replication and extension. Therefore I am now engaged in a study involving 200 adult males and females. The self-consciousness scale and the locus of control scale are again serving as independent variables, and the promise questionnaire's self-report variables are essentially the same. This data will be analyzed and ready to report by August. At this point, besides the value of initial exploratory data of a new domain, the most interesting findings of this research are that as hypothesized, attention habitually focused upon the self correlates positively with moral subjectivity in judgments about promises and promising. This tendency is accompanied by self-doubt or a lack of self-confidence along with less confidence in the promise keeping of others. On the other hand, those high in a sense of internal control expect others to keep their promises. Yet self-focused attention, accompanied by self-doubt and subjectivity of moral judgment does not seem to deter but rather enhance actual promise keeping behavior.

The implications and suggestive findings of the study are that self-focused attention or self-awareness is related to the domain of promises, an important and morally central human concern.

Appendix

Promise Questionnaire and Scoring Instructions

Values Study

This is a study of different personal attitudes and values concerning promises. There have been many contrasting ideas about promises in the fields of law, religion and philosophy, so there are no correct or incorrect answers to these questions. We are interested in your ideas and want you to answer the questions as best you can. All answers will be anonymous and sealed in an envelope by you at the conclusion of the session, so feel free to give your own private opinion.

First take a moment to reflect on what you think a promise is and what is involved in making a promise and keeping it. Then answer the following questions by circling your choice of answers. The scales provided for answers run from 0% to 100%, meaning "Not at all"--0% to "Completely"--100%.

1. When I break a promise I usually hold myself personally responsible to the following extent:

   Not at all 0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50%
   60% 70% 80% 90% 100% Completely

2. When I make a promise that is important to me and I really want to keep it despite the strenuous effort and persistence it's going to take, I'd say the chances of my being able to keep it are:

   Not at all 0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50%
   60% 70% 80% 90% 100% Completely

3. If I forget a promise and don't keep it, I usually hold myself personally responsible to the following extent:

   Not at all 0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50%

   60% 70% 80% 90% 100% Completely

4. When other people make promises that are important to them and they really want to keep them despite the strenuous effort and persistence it's going to take, I'd say their chances of being able to keep them are:

   Not at all 0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50%

   60% 70% 80% 90% 100% Completely

5. When other people break promises, I usually hold them personally responsible to the following extent:

   Not at all 0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50%

   60% 70% 80% 90 % 100% Completely

6. How realistic is it for a person to make a promise that is to be fulfilled at some time in the future? For example, how likely do you think it would be that a person keep a promise that is to be fulfilled:

   (Circle your answers on all five parts.)

   a. one week hence--Not likely--Even chance--Very likely

   b. one month hence-Not likely--Even chance--Very likely

   c. one year hence--Not likely--Even chance--Very likely

   d. ten years hence-Not likely--Even chance--Very likely

   e. 20 years hence--Not likely--Even chance--Very likely

Below are some statements about the morality of making and breaking promises. Again, there are many disagreements over these questions, so there are no correct or incorrect answers. We are interested in <u>your</u> judgments. Rate your agreement or disagreement with these statements on the scales provided, with 0 meaning "Do not agree at all" and 9 meaning "Agree completely." Try to match your answers with your actual judgments and not answer all the questions the same.

* 7. One of the most important moral considerations to take into account whenever I make a promise to someone is the strength of the inter-personal relationships I have with that person as a member of my family, work group, or circle of old friends.

Do not agree 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Agree completely

R 8. One of the most important moral considerations to take into account whenever I make a promise is the absolute moral duty to keep promises.

Do not agree 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Agree completely

R 9. One of the most important moral considerations to take into account whenever I make a promise is the moral worth or seriousness of whatever it is I am promising, i.e., is it right or wrong?

Do not agree 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Agree completely

R 10. A promise once given, even if made through coercion or deception, can never be broken morally.

Do not agree 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Agree completely

R 11. A promise freely given can never be broken morally.

Do not agree 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Agree completely

R 12. A promise freely given can be broken morally only if another equally serious conflicting moral obligation demands it.

Do not agree 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Agree completely

13. A promise freely given can be broken morally if important personal plans and intentions have radically changed over time and now conflict with keeping the promise.

Do not agree 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Agree completely

14. A promise freely given can be broken morally if any of one's personal plans and intentions have changed over time and now conflict with keeping the promise.

Do not agree 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Agree completely

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15. Do you think you can make a promise to the following? Check yes or no.

	Yes	No
A piece of land	____	____
A tree or plant	____	____
A pet	____	____
A person	____	____
A group	____	____
One's self	____	____
God	____	____
The dead	____	____
Future generations	____	____

16. Do you think there can be such a thing as mutual promise between the following? Check yes or no.

	Yes	No
Two animals	____	____
A person & a pet	____	____
Two persons	____	____
A person & a group	____	____
Two groups	____	____
God & a person	____	____
God & a group	____	____

Here are some more statements about which people disagree. Rate <u>your</u> own agreement or disagreement on the scale provided with 0 meaning "Do not agree" and 7 meaning "Agree completely."

People disagree about how explicit, clear, distinct and verbal a promise must be to count as a promise. Below are four statements; read all four first and then rate your agreement or disagreement on the scales.

* 17. In order for a promise to have been made and to exist, the promise must have been heard by someone else, maybe the promisee, who understands a promise is being made.

Do not agree 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Agree completely

* 18. A real promise must consist of a person's explicit statement in words (either spoken or written). If a person does not use words such as "I promise" or "I assure you" or "I certainly shall do it," etc. then he hasn't made a promise.

Do not agree 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Agree completely

* 19. A real promise can be given in explicit words but also by some act or signal without words. If a person nods his head or shakes hands or gives some signal when asked, the non-verbal signal can be a promise.

Do not agree 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Agree completely

R 20. A real promise can be given by explicit words, by some signal, but also by some habitual acts and behavior without words or specific signals. If a person, for instance, should act like a prospective marriage partner but never say anything or give a signal, he or she can still be said to have made a rpomise.

Do not agree 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Agree completely

Scoring for Promise Questionnaire

Questions 1-5 are scored from 1 to 10 depending on the percentages chosen

Question 6 answers are scored so that Not likely is 0
Even chance is 1
Very likely is 2

Questions 8-14 are scored from 0-9 with questions 8-12 scored in reverse

Questions 15 & 16 are scored with Yes equalling 1 and No 0

Question 20 is scored from 0-7 in the reverse direction

* Questions were not used in this present study

R denotes questions scored in reverse

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